

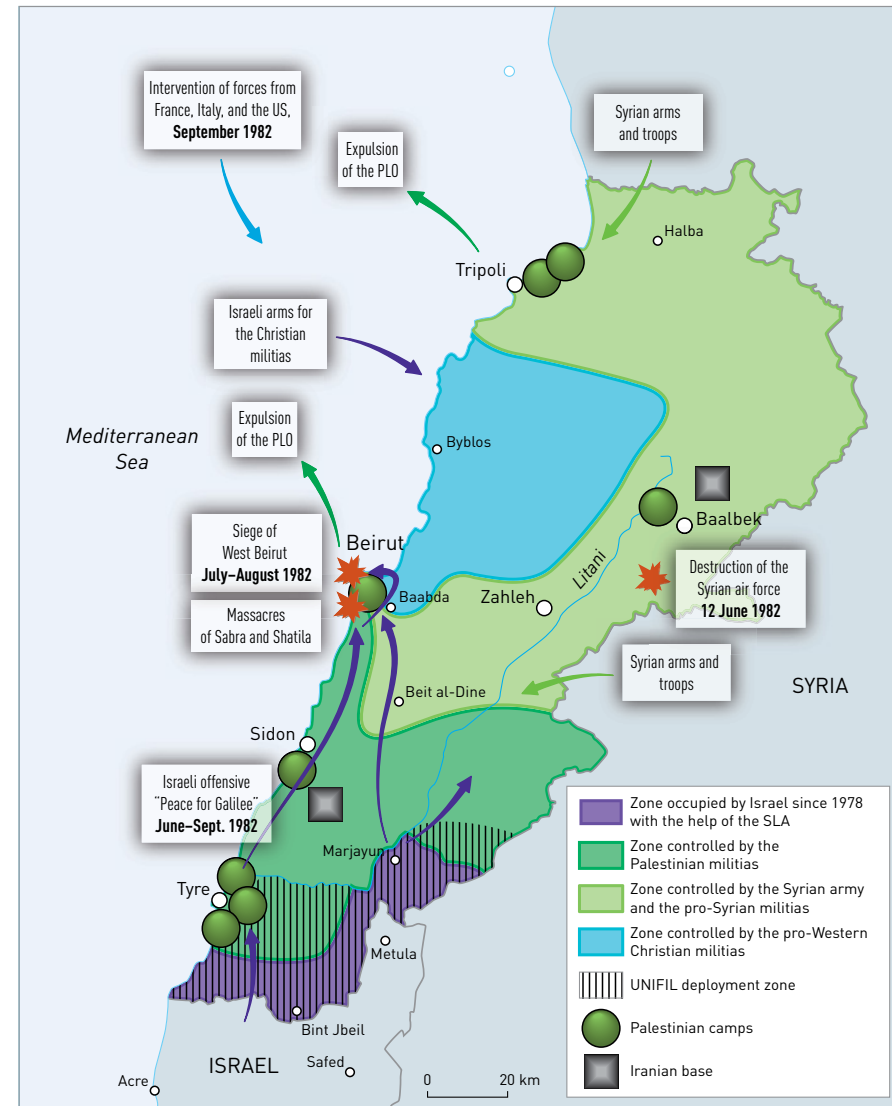
Lebanon: A Buffer State

The term “buffer state,” borrowed from Georges Corm, the former Lebanese Minister of Finance and historian, is perfectly suited for Lebanon, given that, since independence, it has been the theatre of confrontations between foreign powers. This is because of the weakness of the central state and the lack of national unity. The title of the national anthem, “Kullunā li-l-watan” (“All of us for the fatherland”) hardly represents Lebanese political reality. The different parties, manifestations of communities and clans, do not hesitate to seek support abroad, nor to respond favourably to requests from elements abroad that wish to impose themselves in Lebanon.

Lebanon’s neighbours, Israel and Syria, confront each other on Lebanese land, and through these two actors, three international policies emerge: that of the United States and its allies (Israel and Saudi Arabia); that of the Iranian camp, to which Syria belongs, tacitly supported by Russia; and finally that of the European Union, the international actor who has the most to lose in the Iran/US confrontation and continues to try desperately to extinguish peripheral fires.

Syria has always rejected its separation from Lebanon. Consequently, the Syrians have continued to impede Lebanon’s progress, for example, through the breakdown of the customs union in 1950, the blocking of the border, etc. This was true even under liberal Syrian governments. With the rise to power of the Ba’ath Party, champions of Arab nationalism, the pressure increased. In 1976 Syria took advantage of the civil war to intervene in Lebanon (at the request of the Lebanese government), and prevent the Palestinians and their allies from taking power. In 1990 the United States offered Lebanon to Syria in exchange for Syrian support in the first Gulf War. Was that Syrian protectorate durable in the minds of President Bush Sr. and his administration? Did it offer Lebanon to Syria in exchange for its renunciation of the Golan Heights? After Hafez al-Assad’s death in June of 2000, his son Bashar al-Assad had difficulties establishing himself. Syria was obliged to abandon Lebanon amidst suspicions of Syria’s role in the assassination of the former prime minister Rafic Hariri in February of 2005.

THE ISRAELI INVASION OF LEBANON (JUNE–SEPTEMBER 1982)



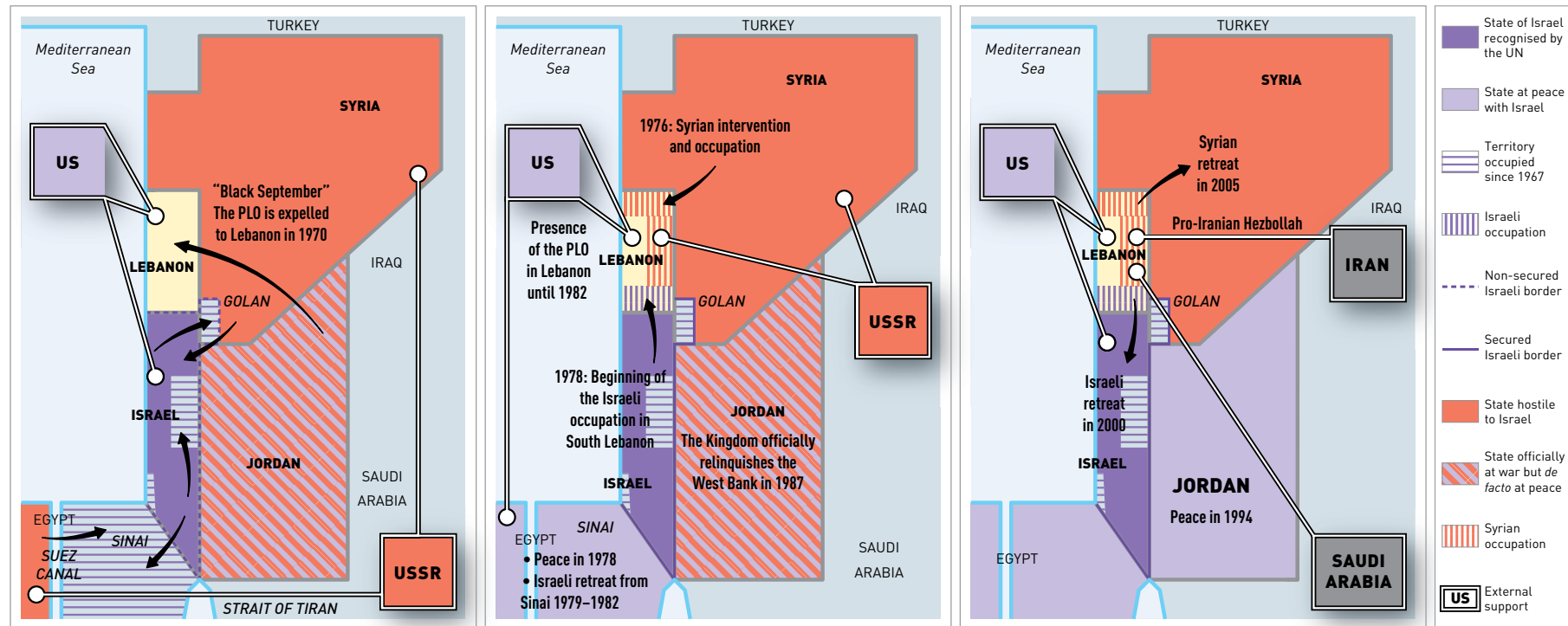
Fabrice Balanche, based on Georges Corm.

LEBANON IN THE ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICT

1949–1973: ON THE PERIPHERY OF THE CONFLICT

1973–1990: THE NEW ARAB-ISRAELI FRONT

1990–2011: A BUFFER STATE



Fabrice Balanche, 2011.

Israel wanted to secure its border in the north from attacks by the Palestinians and Hezbollah. In 1978 Israel occupied southern Lebanon (the so-called “security” zone) with the help of a Lebanese militia, the South Lebanon Army, led by Major Saad Hadad. In 2000 it left this territory except for the region of Shebaa on the slopes of Mount Hermon. Israel carried out destructive interventions on Lebanese territory that caused thousands of civilian casualties: in 1982 in the invasion of Lebanon and siege of West Beirut; in 1996 in Operation “Grapes of Wrath” and the Massacre of Qana; and in the summer of 2006 in the “War of 33 Days”.

Certainly Hezbollah is a real menace to the security of Israel because it has sophisticated weapons capable of reaching main Israeli population centres. However, the sporadic shooting of rockets from the border zone north

of Israel has caused, for some years, few victims on the Israeli side. In fact, Israel remains beyond the reach of a massive attack by Hezbollah. Otherwise, Israel would not have retreated from southern Lebanon in 2000. Israel knows perfectly well that the Lebanese government is too weak to prevent Hezbollah from firing into its territory. How could the fragile Lebanese army disarm a movement that is disciplined in combat, acclaimed for the “liberation” of southern Lebanon, and that enjoys the firm support of Iran and Syria? How can one believe that Syria would abandon a major asset in the global settlement of its conflict with the state of Israel? Hezbollah makes it possible for Syria to avoid direct confrontation with Israel, while maintaining its legitimate demands for the Golan Heights, occupied by Israel since 1967.